

PROSPECT: THE FUTURE OF CRITICAL TOURISM STUDIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROAD AHEAD

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Since its inception in 2005, Critical Tourism Studies (CTS) has profiled itself as a network of scholars who share a vision of producing and promoting social change in and through tourism practice, research, and education. It has sought to legitimize the critical school of thought in tourism studies, and to provide an inclusive environment for the alternative voices in the academy. Six CTS conferences later, a vibrant and inclusive network of scholars has emerged, representing a wide range of institutions and tourism interests. Yet as the network matures, the question has emerged on what the future holds for CTS. Has the network achieved its goals? Has it helped make the academy become more accepting of critical tourism research? Has it remained an inclusive environment for alternative voices in tourism studies? And if it has achieved its goals, does that now make the network redundant? We reflect here on what lies ahead, and which challenges we face in creating a renaissance in critical tourism studies. We will consider how these ideas can help us in elaborating on the critique of critical tourism studies itself.

Key words: Critical theory; Tourism; Interdisciplinary; Academic activism

Foundations of Critical Theory

Let us briefly reflect on some of the main postulates of critical theory. As it has been the case since early 1930s' developments of critical theory paradigm, critical theorists rarely agree with one another but instead they challenge each other. Despite constant discourse, critical theories by large accept interdisciplinarity, reflection, dialectics, and

criticism as its postulates (Horkheimer, 1972). The social context under which research takes place is through critical reflection included into the process of theory building and academic activism.

Critical theory can be conceptualized in its narrow or its broad meaning. In its narrow meaning, critical theory seeks “emancipation,” “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 244). However, many

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critical scholars have also criticized the very notion of “emancipation,” as it is seen as a “Eurocentric” perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). During the times of colonial expansions, “emancipation” was the main excuse for colonialization, where the locals have been constructed as “the inferior Other” (Said, 1978) in a need of Western tutelage. Such an attitude has continued even after the countries were freed from the colonial occupation. Western hegemonic discourse has thus been constructed in its relation to the “inferior Other” that needs to be “emancipated.”

In its broader sense, critical social inquiry ought to combine rather than separate the poles of philosophy and the social sciences: explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity. Such an approach permits their enterprise to be practical in a distinctively moral (rather than instrumental) sense. Furthermore, critical theory believes that interdisciplinary work brings the insights that would have been completely unobtainable if worked within narrow academic domains, and rejects the premise that the facts are fixed and independent of theory, as it is seen in a positivist paradigm. In summary, Horkheimer (1972) argues that what makes critical theory *critical* is that its aim is not only to bring a specific understanding, but also to create social and political conditions closer to humans and through that transform the society into a better one.

Critical Theory and CTS Today

In that context, we can reflect on how the academic environment that sparked the creation of CTS has evolved since 2005. It appears that some of the pressures that are referred to in the introduction to this Special Issue are still in existence now; one could even argue that since the economic downturn of 2008, these pressures have only intensified. Increased scrutiny of public spending and a call for austerity have led to the “massification” of higher education, the desire (by governments) for universities “to do more with less,” and a quantum shift in the levels of accountability demanded of university academics (Aarveaara & Dobson 2015, p. 212). This has exacerbated the demands on academics that were already present when CTS was created,

such as the pressure to meet research targets that some might believe to be unreasonable, including the pressure to publish and to win research grants; to forge links with industry and other external parties; to deliver more contact time to students; and to avoid giving low grades, particularly to fee-paying international students (Aarveaara & Dobson, 2015). “Critical pedagogy,” inspired by Paulo Freire (1970) and his seminal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has made inroads within the CTS community; however, the majority of students in higher education come from privileged backgrounds in both developed and developing parts of the world. These students need to become aware of the complex and challenging times we face today. The mounting cost of education has resulted in students acting like customers, which presents a challenge to instructors who want to challenge their world views.

Thus, the corporatization of higher education sector has resulted in a decoupling between so-called knowledge producers (researchers) and knowledge users (teachers). Academics are often required to produce economically relevant knowledge, and their activities are increasingly evaluated by bibliometrics such as publications, citations, and collaboration, and assessed by indices and how much external research funding they bring into the university (Shin, 2015). All this is required while students are academically less prepared, class sizes have become bigger, and quality assurance schemes require much paperwork. Hall (2011) referred to these bibliometric pressures as a “game” with its own rules. Many departments and individuals have become focused on playing the game better, as *where* a study is published is often seen as more important than *what* is published. Hall (2011) added that “the greatest challenge to tourism scholars may be to stop playing the game altogether” (p. 26), but immediately adds this is an unrealistic expectation.

This has resulted in an environment where the relevance and quality of research is measured by the quantity of publications in ranked journals, which are likely to have a niche readership—not in an environment that “promotes social change in and through tourism practice, research and education,” as reflected in the goals of CTS. *Annals of Tourism Research*, one of the highest ranked tourism

journals, also has a category “critical theory,” which is offered as a choice when submitting an article. Does that mean that “Critical Tourism Studies” is now mainstream and accepted, or “critical theory” category is simply “tick the box” exercise from which the chosen ones benefit?

During the CTS conferences, delegates have often reflected critically on the restrictive nature of current academic performance assessment and have argued that, in some institutions, engaging in critical tourism research can be at the expense of obtaining a promotion or tenure. To add to this, many experienced injustices due to the notion that academic community favors “the One,” usually Anglo-Saxon, male academic with no disabilities, at the expense of “the Other,” usually black and minority, female, and with disability, which is deemed to remain “the Other.” It is still more challenging for “the Other” than for “the One” to either publish or get promoted, either embracing mainstream or critical scholarship. Questioning social activism, Mahrouse (2014) considers the (re)production of white power, showing easiness of sliding into their comfortable position of dominance and privilege based on Western hegemony. Bianchi and Stephenson (2014) argued that allegedly inclusive values of human rights, equality, freedom, and cosmopolitanism are unevenly reproduced globally where only certain structures of the society are destined to enjoy them as such. Bourdieu (1991) called this “symbolic violence.” Thus, it is very challenging to speak about critical engagement of the scholars to bring social justice if there is no justice in academia itself.

Thus, as Horkheimer (1972) put it, for the scholarship to be critical, it is not only to bring specific understanding, but also create social and political conditions that liberate from symbolically violent (Bourdieu, 1991) oppression. Inspired by historic materialism, critical theorists argue that people in fact marginalize themselves further as they go along with the hegemonic discourse where those who have the power construct the knowledge; “the Others” follow academic green washing without questioning. One of the future challenges of CTS would be aware of these notions, challenge them and be more inclusive to “the Other” critical thinkers. Thus, CTS network of scholars is even more pertinent

than ever before, as the challenges critical scholars face in academia are mirrored in the wider sociopolitical context.

CTS scholars reflect on nationalism, poverty and social class, sectarian politics, gender justice, immigration, political violence, religious consumerism, environmental degradation, and climate change, all exacerbated by neoliberal capitalism and government imposed austerity, which we face today both in academia and in societies we live in. The second potential challenge for the CTS network will be to maintain a sense of unity in its diversity. As the network has grown, a greater variety of research interests, philosophical and methodological perspectives, and interpretations of criticality have emerged. Therefore, the question has been raised of whether and how CTS can remain true to its critical roots. CTS has espoused the broader meaning of Critical Theory, as notes on its website: “Adopting a broad definition of ‘criticality,’ CTS seeks to find ‘fresh’ ways of theorizing tourism by locating the phenomenon in its wider political, economic, cultural and social contexts” (Wilson, Harris, & Small, 2008, p. 16). However, some CTS scholars have argued to adopt a more restrictive perspective of Critical Theory within the CTS network. One of the challenges for the future of CTS may be to maintain an inclusive approach to Critical Theory, while still maintaining the critical principles the network was founded on: in other words, to maintain a balance between theoretical purism and not being “critical enough.”

The CTS network was founded on the principle of “hopeful tourism scholarship”: a value-based, life-world approach that embraces culturally critical and reflexive scholarship (Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007), as opposed to research that shies away from fundamental social and political questions, and instead offers solutions to (often smaller scale) business problems. Alvesson and Deetz (2006) referred to the role of hope in Critical Theory when they describe one of its principles as follows:

Through reflections on the ways ideology enters into person/world/knowledge construction and by providing more open forums of expression and a type of discourse aimed at mutual understanding there is *hope* for the production of social consensus

and social agreements that better fulfil human needs. (p. 273; italics added)

However, Higgins-Desbiolles and Whyte (2013) argued that this hope may be misguided and misdirected, and that Critical Theory should also include elements of resistance and revolution. This implies that a future challenge for the CTS network may be to strike a balance between being “too critical” (purist) and “too utopian” (not focused enough on social change). However, Žižek (2011) reminded us that the only true utopianism today would be if we imagine that events will continue to roll as they are now, that is, that the broadening class gaps, environmental pollutions, and mad run for the short-term profit and capitalist games can continue indefinitely. Žižek’s argument in a rather paradoxical way indeed bridged the divide between purist and utopian approaches, making it a philosophical continuum rather than philosophical divide.

The third challenge is that Critical Theory is by default interdisciplinary. However, research that does not belong to single subject area is deemed “too risky” for the sustainability of the institutions. The UK’s infamous research excellence framework (REF), which is an example of assessing the research excellence, argues that it makes allowances for interdisciplinary research, but this seems to be “lip service” rather than a proper dedication and commitment. It appears that the difficulty to go beyond disciplinary and subdisciplinary silos is an indication that although our critical research is deemed to be postmodern, or even post-postmodern in a sense (Cova, Maclaran, & Bradshaw, 2013), there is still a seed of modernity under which social sciences operate. In the course of their training, most of the academics get by necessity indoctrinated in the axioms and terminology of their discipline or postdiscipline. There are very few academic institutions where the Ph.D. student may transgress into the cross-disciplinary training. Many authors from different academic disciplines look for a possibility to break away from the modernist thoughts and their disciplinary silos by trying to communicate their ideas beyond their own disciplines. However, the disciplines were not able to engage in the dialogue, as the language, norms, and literature of disciplinary groups constructs a cultural identity of the discipline (Becher, 1989). As a response to these

challenges, Ateljevic (2013) reflected on Enrique Dussel’s (2012) concept of transmodernity in the context of a paradigm shift in cultural and material development in human (although dominantly Western) history. The process of paradigm shift started at almost the same time in different disciplines and subdisciplines of social sciences; however, as Ateljevic (2013) argued, these responses are deeply embedded within the destructive binaries of rational/emotional; feminine/masculine; subject/object; internal/external; mind/body/spirit; winner/loser; dominant/passive; man/nature; and agency/structure/resistance are still very much present in the academic work today. The problem is that there are many sublime states in between these binaries that are, in order to simplify the argument, forcefully put in one of these binaries without much of a critical assessment, failing Weber’s adequacy at the level of meaning (Tucker, 1965).

Conclusion

This Special Issue has given us a food for thought to reflect on what we have achieved so far with CTS, and what challenges lie ahead. Clearly, to a certain extent we have to argue that our voices are heard more than was the case a decade ago. More critical discourse articles have been published and academic activism has become a permanent facet of CTS. The links between critical pedagogy, research, and academic activism have been acknowledged. However, in a current state of the strength of critical thinking in the social science research, criticism of today’s grand narratives has stimulated fundamental changes in theory construction, arguing that theory should rather been taken out of its dullness and despair and put back into its pure radical interference, committed strongly to the ideas of the universal social justice. Despite the challenges that lie ahead, the CTS network will continue to strive towards this goal.

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